

Our younger son, Sam, began his driver's education classes this past Tuesday and obtained his driver's permit. We now have four licensed drivers and only three vehicles, a transportation volcano just waiting to erupt.

I was talking with Sam the other day, we were out on a drive through the country, and I asked him, "What do you look forward to most about getting your license?"

He said, "The freedom. I can go where I want, when I want."

I told him that wasn't necessarily true, that he had share a car with his brother, and help pay for gas. I pointed out it was a probationary license, so that Joan or I would have to be with him.

That appeared to take a lot of the fun out of it, and now he's thinking of going back to riding his bicycle.

We've been talking about rites of passages, those moments in life when we move from one status to another. We began by thinking about births, then our experience in first grade, specifically whether we choose compassion or fear when we first face injustice. Today, I want to talk about that ticket to American freedom—the driver's license, and the ever-present partner of freedom—responsibility.

I was thinking about this the past week while Sam and I were out driving. We were approaching an intersection. We weren't required to stop, but traffic coming from the other direction was, they had a stop sign. I could see a car coming rather quickly, so I told Sam, "Slow down and be ready to stop if this driver doesn't see the stop sign."

Sam said, "But I have the right of way." Sam has always had a strong sense of right and wrong.

I said, "That's true, you do have the right of way. But if you're dead, that won't matter. So be ready to stop."

At the last minute, the other driver noticed the stop sign and stopped. I won't mention the driver's gender, for fear of starting an argument, but she was talking on her text phone.

It's odd that we equate driving with freedom, since it is one of the most controlled activities in which we participate. It must be that way, of course, for if we didn't have laws and rules to which we all adhered, driving would be chaotic and dangerous. If people didn't stay in their own lane, stop at stop signs and traffic lights, obey speed limits, and wait for their turn, driving wouldn't work. So we have this system of laws we trust one another to follow, and when we get our license, we promise to obey those laws and drive responsibly. If we're not responsible, we lose our license. We do have freedom, but with our freedom comes responsibility, so we can live and function as a society.

This has been the case for as long as people have lived together. With freedom, come responsibility and consideration. When the early church was expanding beyond its origins in the Israel community, accepting Gentiles into their fellowship, a debate began about whether some Christians were free to do certain things other Christians found culturally or spiritually offensive. They all were followers of Jesus, but they all brought with them traditions and customs other Christians didn't understand and even found offensive. It was becoming a source of some division, so Paul addressed it in his first letter to the church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 8).

Paul said it was possible to do something in good conscience, that we were morally, legally, and spiritually free to do something, but to be careful that our freedom didn't come at the expense of someone else's misery. Paul was talking about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Some Christians felt perfectly free to do that, others were scandalized by it. So Paul said, "You're free to do it. There's nothing in your Gentile customs that prevent it. But for the sake of the community, can you change grocery stores." I'm paraphrasing, but that's the gist of it. I'm probably the last person in the world who should be talking about not doing or saying something others might find offensive, so please know I'm well aware of that and wrestle with that often—about where my right to speak and my responsibility to my wider spiritual community intersect.

Nevertheless, Paul's point was a good one and one I told my sons when they got their licenses. Enjoy your freedom, but remember that it comes with responsibilities and consideration for others.

We talk a great deal about freedom in this country, but we don't talk as much about how freedom is tempered by responsibility. If any culture, society, or nation is going to flourish, it must take its responsibilities as seriously as its freedoms. If we had taken our responsibilities as seriously as we take our freedoms, we wouldn't be facing the vast economic, ecological, and social problems we're now confronting.

Do you remember the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible? Brothers. Cain grew angry and jealous of his brother and lured him out to the field out of view of their parents and murdered him.

God tracked down Cain and asked him, "Where is your brother?"

Cain said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Well, that was the problem all along. He wasn't his brother's keeper, but he should have been. Cain had a high sense of freedom, but a low sense of responsibility.

The other day I was at a store where a man was buying a gas can. He was upset because new gas cans come with a special spout that doesn't permit the release of gas fumes into the atmosphere. The store owner was explaining that to him, and the man was yelling about it, saying, "What do I care? I ain't gonna be here." Then he stormed out of the store.

Four hours later, I'm up at a church in the city and run into a guy named Dave Miner. He'd worked at Lilly Endowment for a guy named Jim Morris. After Lilly, Jim Morris went on to head up Indianapolis Water, but his passion was philanthropy, helping people. In 2002, he was asked to become the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program, so he spent the next several years traveling to the poorest regions of the world, doing what he could to feed starving people. His term expired, he moved back to Indianapolis, called Dave Miner, who'd just retired, and said, "Lots of hungry kids out there. Let's do something about it."

So now Dave Miner volunteers fifty hours a week for the Interfaith Hunger Initiative raising money to feed hungry kids. Dave Miner worked hard for years thinking about retirement and taking it easy. Couldn't do it. So he feeds hungry kids instead. Every time I see him, he's smiling and happy and full of life.

Last year, in 2009, the Interfaith Hunger Initiative raised 275 tons of food for local food pantries, and each day feed 2700 children in Kenya through school lunch programs.

Now, let's think about what kind of world we want to live in. A world where people walk around saying, "What do I care? I ain't gonna be here." And we are free to do that. No one can stop us. We are free to be indifferent. Or do we want to live in a world where Jim Morris calls Dave Miner and says, "We've got to feed these children."

Freedom is good. I love being free. But with freedom comes responsibility. Cain asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God didn't answer the question. Instead, God let Cain live and forbid anyone from harming Cain, so Cain could have a long life and lots of time to ponder that question. The Bible doesn't say, but I hope Cain eventually concluded that he was his brother's keeper. And I hope we conclude the same.

(If you wish to donate money to the Interfaith Hunger Initiative, you can visit their website at interfaithhungerinitiative.org.)